

Course outline: Sound Design for Film and Television

The MFA in Sound Design for Film and Television is a specialisation within the broader **MFA in Film, Television and Games**.

The course is built on the belief that an understanding of story is the bedrock of great sound design. Students undertake workshops that engage them in key technical and craft skills development while at the same time building their confidence in film narrative, character development and scene shaping.

Over their two years the sound design students collaborate with students from practically all other MFA specialization, during both workshops and productions. There are very close links between the sound design, editing and composing MFA courses, with a strong focus in the first term on collaborative workshops that are designed to forge effective interdepartmental workflows and long-lasting creative relationships.

The two-year MFA is an intensive education in the creative use of sound with image, whether it is film, video, television or games. It covers, at current industry standards, tracklaying, FX and dialogue recording, some music recording, sound design and mixing.

Students for the course are selected first and foremost on their creative abilities, coupled with a passion for their chosen medium. Technical abilities are important, but providing they have a good level of basic competence these skills can be taught.

Curriculum Summary

The course consists of a series of highly practical modules providing students with the skills and abilities to contribute effectively to the collaborative film, TV and games projects throughout the course. The modules set out to challenge student views, perceptions and abilities through tutorials, workshops, seminars, screen arts programme and productions. Modules start with either a tutorial or workshop, then develop into practical exercises or projects.

Workshops

The first year includes a series of workshops that aim to stretch the students into new ways of thinking and working, as well as allowing the development of specific skills. Students work in a group, often with other disciplines, and working relationships are developed.

Group Seminars

Group seminars occur on a regular basis within the department and students participate in discussions with tutors and visiting lecturers. Case studies of current films or television programmes are open to all students to attend where the producer or director will visit the NFTS to screen their work followed by critical evaluation, analysis and discussion with the students.

Screen Arts Programme

The Screen Arts Programme runs throughout the two year course and students attend screenings and discussions each week. Specific screen arts seminars relating to sound may be arranged within the department to enable connections to be made with their own work in the recognition of styles and genres.

Productions

Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their role as sound designer on productions. They are expected to collaborate creatively, intellectually and practically with the production team. A responsible professional attitude is encouraged and is supported and overseen by the teaching staff, who aim to challenge and nurture the student's talent without undermining their independence.

Year One

The first year contains the following 5 assessed modules:

- Module 1 – Beyond the Frame;
- Module 2 – Father;
- Module 3 – Moment of Truth;
- Module 4 – Without Words;
- Module 5 – First Year Film.

Other workshops and seminars are also included during the year, providing valuable further opportunities to learn.

Modules

Module 1 – Beyond the Frame (*Cross Specialisation with Documentary, Editing and Composing*)

Working in teams led by each Directing Documentary student, each team will create a short film that uses the combination of sound, music and picture to distil an idea, story or emotion with great economy of means, and experiment with the different ways a soundtrack can influence imagery and create meaning.

Module 2 - Father

This module gives students an opportunity to design and mix a complete soundtrack for a short live action fiction film, applying the skills which they have learned as part of “Deconstructing the Soundtrack”. Working in pairs, students have joint responsibility for the creative and technical aspects of their film. There are a series of individual tutorials and a final group review in one of the cinemas.

Module 3 - Moment of Truth *(Cross Specialisation with Documentary, Editing and Composing)*

This module is a collaborative exercise to make a short documentary film that attempts to capture an important moment in a subject's life. Each sound designer collaborates with the rest of the team on the creative and technical aspects of the soundtrack, with responsibility for delivery of a finished mix.

Module 4 – Without Words *(Cross Specialisation with Fiction, Editing and Composing, Cinematography, Location Sound Recording and Assistant Directing)*

This module is a collaborative exercise in which students are required to make a film within strict parameters. Students are encouraged to experiment with cinematic time to create a coherent story where staging, image and sound are used to their fullest potential. Each sound designer collaborates with the rest of the team on the creative and technical aspects of the soundtrack, with responsibility for delivery of a finished mix.

Module 5 - First Year Fiction Film *(Cross Specialisation with Fiction, Cinematography, Production Design, Screenwriting, Editing and Composing)*

Throughout the first-year ideas and scripts will be developed for a 10-15-minute film which is shot and edited during the autumn term. Sometimes these films are based around a shared theme or genre. Scripts will be developed by the producers and directors in conjunction with cinematography, production design and sound. The composers provide the music and the films are edited and mixed by the end of the year. Sound students sound edit and mix the project. This is a key first year module.

Other Elements of the Course

Trimbin

This workshop is joint across Editing, Sound Design and Composing. Working in teams, each team is given 30 minutes of picture and sound trims (collected from various other films from past years) to edit into a sequence describing a “personal statement”. The final piece is 3 minutes long. The workshop primarily focuses on working with the found material. However, at different stages of the workshop, the tutors will offer each team the opportunity to create limited original material that they can use on their timeline.

Deconstructing the Soundtrack

The first term provides a series of workshops and exercises which aim to give students a basic foundation in technical sound knowledge, including sound editing, recording and mixing technologies, along with film techniques to assist them in modules undertaken during the rest of the course. These include:

- What is a soundtrack: practical exercises deconstruct the soundtrack into atmospheres, effects and dialogue in order to understand how each component contributes to the overall effect.

- Scene analysis: these sessions facilitate a highly analytical breakdown of chosen cinematic sequences. Together with a lead tutor, students will discuss the language, mis-en-scene and stylizations at work in the sequences.
- Sound design and mixing workshops: A series of practical workshops provide opportunities to learn and develop the skills required for post-production sound, familiarity with sound editing systems, tracklaying, Foley recording and mixing.

Bangra

Starting with the basic turnover assets, the students are expected to deliver a full and complete soundtrack, demonstrating that they are developing an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the following fundamental areas of sound post-production: dialogue editing, foley recording and editing, fx and atmos editing, music spotting and editing.

Animation Workshop *(Cross Specialisation with Animation)*

The first Animation / Sound Design workshop is non-collaborative and explores the technique of creating a picture to an existing sound track. It offers you a free hand to create a sound track which the animators use as a central narrative trigger to create a short film.

Games Workshops *(Cross Specialisation with Games and Composing)*

A series of opportunities to collaborate with the Games students, provide audio components for a range of projects, and help develop and enhance the effectiveness of the sound elements for each game.

Exit

Starting with a live action, mute short film, students are asked to deliver a full and complete soundtrack, demonstrating that they are developing an increasingly sophisticated understanding of all fundamental areas of sound post-production and an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the use of sound to develop character, narrative, and drama.

There will be a strong focus on developing mixing skills, with dedicated time allocated to each student in a dubbing theatre.

Moments of Consequence *(Cross Specialisation with Games Design and Composing)*

In this module, each Sound Design student is required to assist the Games Design student in the acquisition and implementation of a game's sound elements.

Year Two

Year two contains many practical projects and workshops, creating opportunities to implement and use the principles and foundations that were developed during the first year of the course.

The work continues to build on the storytelling and the creative aspects of sound design, as well as workshops and seminars that develop industry skills and awareness to help students transition to the professional world when they graduate.

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Television Commencing January 2026

The second year contains the following 6 assessed modules:

- Module 7 – Question Documentary;
- Module 8 – Animation Graduation Film;
- Module 9 – Digi Fiction Film;
- Module 10 – Documentary Graduation Film;
- Module 11 – Fiction Graduation Film;
- Module 12 – Science & Natural History Graduation Film.

Modules

Module 7 - Question Documentary *(Cross Specialisation with Directing Documentary, Editing, and Composing)*

This collaborative exercise is led by Directing Documentary to make a 15 -20 min film which attempts to answer a question about something significant in the world selected by each Directing Documentary student.

This module continues to develop the understanding of the aesthetics, craft and teamwork involved in documentary programme-making. The sound design students have a 2 week tracklay and a 3 day mix.

Module 8 - Animation Graduation Film *(Cross Specialisation with Directing Animation, Editing, Composing, and Producing)*

The Animation Graduation Films are approx. 5 – 10 minutes. In Term 1 the Sound Design students begin discussing ideas and concepts with the Animation directors and begin supplying location sound or guide track sound as the animators develop the project. The collaboration between Animation director, sound and music is often highly creative and innovative and continues over much of the second year.

There is a specialist animation and storytelling week in term two that feeds into the development of the animatic for the Animation Graduation Film. The final sound postproduction takes place in term 3, December and January, with a focused period of 2-3 weeks tracklaying and 5 days mixing.

Module 9 - Digi Fiction Film *(Cross Specialisation with Directing Fiction, Editing, Composing, and Location Sound Recording)*

In this module students make a 15 minute short scripted fiction film shot on a digital format. Sound design students will sound edit their film but one of their colleagues will take on the role of dubbing mixer. This replicates a typical industry way of working and each sound designer gets the experience of mixing a film that they haven't sound edited themselves. For the fiction director this 'fresh pair of eyes' can open up even more creative discussions and ideas during the mix.

By the end of this module students should be able to demonstrate, through their work, an industry standard awareness of sound design as well as working efficiently and creatively within a team. The sound design students have a 3 week tracklay and a 3 day mix.

Modules 10–12 - Graduation Films for Documentary, Fiction and Science & Natural History

Sound design on the graduation projects provides a further opportunity to develop advanced creative and technical skills. Students develop a deeper understanding of the key components of an effective soundtrack. They will learn how to shape and craft the dialogue, sound effects and music to deliver an emotionally engaging and coherent narrative. Good organisational skills, time management and the prioritising of tasks are essential in these final productions.

Module 10 - Documentary Graduation Film

For this module Sound Design students will work with the second year Directing Documentary, Editing, Composing, and Colourist students. The Documentary Graduation Films, are approx. 20 – 40 minutes. And have a 3 week tracklay with a 5 day mix.

Module 11 - Fiction Graduation Film

For this module Sound Design students will work with the second year Directing Fiction, Editing, Composing, and Colourist students. The Fiction Graduation Films, are approx. 20 minutes. And have a 3 week tracklay with a 5 day mix.

Module 12 - Science & Natural History Graduation Film

For this module Sound Design students will work with the second year Directing and Producing Science & Natural History, Editing, Composing, and Colourist students. The Science & Natural History Graduation Films, are approx. 20 minutes. And have a 3 week tracklay with a 5 day mix.

Other Elements of the Course

There are additional technical, craft and creative workshops in the second year that feed directly into students' graduation work, examples include:

- Advanced workflows and Protocols templates;
- ADR, prep, recording and editing;
- Assistant editor skills development, managing turnovers, Delivery of assets from editorial dept; Rushes conforming, dialogue expand, re conforming, prepping for the mix, mix deliverables;
- A deeper look at noise reduction and clean up tools;
- Creature Fx and vocalisation, sound design, sound synthesis software and techniques;
- Action Fx workshop;
- Practise interviews;
- Animation sound design and storytelling week;

- Ambience workshop;
- A number of 1:1 tutorials for sound editing and mixing across the second year with industry professionals;
- Workshops for; personal and career development, organisational, time management and business skills;
- Avid S6, S4 console advanced training to enable students to explore mixing in Dolby 5.1, and Dolby Atmos.

Dissertation

As part of the work necessary to qualify for an MFA, each student is required to produce an independent written dissertation or video essay.

This runs from the start of the 1st Year to June of the 2nd Year. Following discussions and feedback with the Sound Design Dissertation Tutor, and Screen Arts tutors, students deliver a 500-word outline proposal by June of the 1st year; 2000-word detailed proposal and structure by November of the 1st Year. Full draft dissertation of 7,000-10,000 words must be delivered by April of the 2nd Year and following discussion with tutors and feedback, the final version of the dissertation by June of the 2nd Year. An alternative option of a twenty minute video essay is also available to MFA students.

The aim should be to undertake original research of an investigative nature, which extends the boundaries of specialist knowledge within particular areas of Screen Sound.